Language policy myths and realities at ML Sultan Technikon

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the issue of language policy and practice in higher education institutions, by observing the impact of interventionist strategies such as the language policy at the ML Sultan Technikon, which is situated in Durban, Kwa Zulu Natal. The language issue is assessed against the backdrop of multilingualism and the official 11 language policy, as entrenched in the Constitution. Despite the national call for multilingualism, the medium of instruction at the Technikon, as at most tertiary institutions in South Africa, is English. This article examines recent language debates in the country, then discusses the implementation of the Technikon’s language policy. The conclusion is that despite the hegemonic role played by English, attempts must be made to encourage multilingualism or regional bilingualism, or else pay the price of further marginalising the African languages.

INTRODUCTION
Language has always been an emotive issue in South Africa. Sections 8 and 31 of the Constitution, for instance, equate denying people their language rights with denying them their basic human rights. With multilingualism firmly entrenched in the form of our official 11 language policy, the time has come to reflect on what has been accomplished in terms of implementation. The Constitution also affords all South Africans choice in terms of which language they would like to communicate in or be educated in. Most appear to opt for English medium in their education, in their work environment and in everyday life. Pienaar (1991:47) states “For better or worse English has become the lingua franca of the South African community and it is indispensable to virtually every course that is offered in our tertiary institutions”. The Constitution, however, states that the use of all 11 languages is contingent on practicality and expense (Price 1997). Constitutional safeguards such as the “where reasonably practicable” addendum appear to assume the role of protector and preserver of English hegemony. The previously marginalised African languages appear to be more vulnerable, but why, if they too are accorded the status of official languages? In Balfour’s (1999:103) view: “It is now a paradox that aspirations for equality and equity are inadvertently subverted through constitutional safeguards which, though meant to protect former marginal and impoverished languages in South Africa, nonetheless allow for the dominance of one language and the continued marginalisation of others.”

The focus of this article is not to rehash the language debate, but rather to present the language options offered to all South Africans, some of the constraints involved in implementing those options and to examine the role played by language policy in education as an intervention in maintaining those options. Specific reference is made to language policy in higher education, using the ML Sultan Technikon Language Policy. The short term, medium term and long term goals will also be examined by observing interventions which have been implemented, and the constraints faced in their implementation. Results of interviews with students and tutors will be discussed and recommendations for language use suggested.

LITERATURE REVIEW: REVISITING MULTILINGUALISM
The numerous arguments in favour of multilingualism, not just locally, but globally as well, bear consideration. Ortiz (1999), for instance referred to monolingualism as a handicap, and added that even if the language used is a world language such as English, the speakers of the language would see the world in a limited dimension. The Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB) (2001:5) provide the benefits of multilingualism as:

- enhancing effective communication
- increasing efficiency in business
- contributing to improved health and safety standards
- enabling participatory decision making
- making education and training opportunities more accessible
• improving working relations
• enhancing acceptance and understanding of other cultures.

Multilingualism must be seen as a resource with the potential to empower all South Africans to participate fully in our country’s social, political and economic life. International backing for multilingualism such as UNESCO’s General Conference which supports diversity and multilingual education and the European Union’s plan for 2001 as the European Year of Languages bear testimony (Ortiz 1999).

It is imperative that South Africa too start implementing multilingualism, and more so, functional multilingualism, as spelt out by the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB). It may be considered idealistic to expect tertiary institutions, for instance, to adopt a multilingual medium of instruction, but it is possible to promote bilingualism, at least at regional level, or functional multilingualism. It is quite possible to consider dual medium instruction and notes if the resources are made available, as they should, if this is to the students’ advantage.

One of the underlying principles of PANSALB is functional multilingualism, as a means of promoting linguistic diversity. The main criteria for functional multilingualism are language preference, language use and language proficiency. Conducting Aids training in rural KZN, for example, would not achieve its goals if it were conducted in English medium. The practice of functional multilingualism therefore refers to selecting the most suitable language to serve a particular function. However, in order to establish the languages to use it is necessary to conduct language surveys or audits. Calteaux (2001) is equally strong in her call for functional multilingualism, language preference and language for social justice.

What is called for is not more debate on the language issue, but interventionist strategies to ensure a truly democratic, unified nation, reflective of its multicultural, multilingual citizens (Kajee 2000). Monolingualism goes against the grain of national unity and it is time for South Africans to adopt a broader view. If English medium instruction is marginalising second language learners, then attempts must be made to embrace South Africa’s indigenous languages as well. The way forward should start with interventionist strategies.

THE ENGLISH VERSUS MOTHER-TONGUE DEBATE

This is to many a tired debate, however it bears mention if only for the fact that English still plays a hegemonic role. Many South Africans consider an English medium of instruction as the route to empowerment, ensuring future career and economic success. They appear to prefer sending their children to schools where they are ensured an education in the medium of English. South African tertiary institutions are also largely English medium institutions. How ever, the majority of English second language students who enrol at tertiary institutions enter with limited English skills, including those who completed English medium secondary education. They find themselves having to attend bridging courses, augmented programmes or basic English modules because the level of English they have acquired does not prepare them for the more complex academic and cognitive tasks required at tertiary level, an option they sometimes find stigmatising. This places them at a disadvantage (Dreyer 1995). These students need help not only with language and study skills, but with processing content as well (Starfield 1994) because language impacts on all facets of their academic life.

These are some of the considerations taken into account by Education Minister Kader Asmal when he announced a recent rethink of the role of school language policy (Daily News: 8 May 2001). His stance is that the language policy established in 1997 was theoretically sound but mother tongue teaching had worked well only for pupils who were English and Afrikaans speakers, not for the speakers of the indigenous languages. Pupils are being encouraged to learn via the medium of the language on offer, usually English, which compromised their cognitive development.

Many have the notion that English is necessary because it is the international language. International yes, but one of many, certainly not the international language. The world is changing, and the languages of international communication are definitely changing as well from English to European and Asian languages. McDermott (in Extra & Maartens 1998:105) maintains that the attitude that English is fundamental to entering the international arena is “linguistic colonialism and a denial of a basic human right”.

A strong argument in favour of English medium education, especially at tertiary level, is that it facilitates mobility from one tertiary institution to another (Lazenby 1996). Mobility is closely linked to articulation, which is the decision by higher education institutions to mutually accredit courses. Until recently, higher education institutions operated independently. Lazenby maintains that English as the medium of instruction would facilitate mobility among institutions, nationally and internationally. No doubt the human resource and cost factor would be reduced if only one language is used. In addition, because English is predominant in industry, it would be the pragmatic option for higher education as well.

However, this does not ease the plight of the student with limited English proficiency upon entering a
tertiary institution. Efficient mother tongue education is more beneficial to learners at an early stage and would actually enhance their use of English at tertiary level (Balfour 1999), a stance maintained by Minister Asmal as well. Students with limited English proficiency are the victims through circumstances beyond their control. Attending language bridging and develop programmes to compensate for language limitations is stigmatising to some students (Starfield 1994), especially when many of these courses are conducted independently of mainstream courses. An old argument, but what is required is more integration of language and content courses, not administering the language band aid in isolation. In the interim though, what is happening to the students’ mother tongue? The vast body of knowledge that was acquired in the mother tongue and laid the foundation for other cognitive skills must not be overlooked. Even if the students are wont to opt for English because they see it as the route to a more lucrative future, the mother tongue cannot be ignored, because it goes against the grain of promoting national unity.

South Africans must be cautioned that it is inevitable that the growth of English could mean the decline of other indigenous languages. Alexander (1996) is convinced that people be allowed to conduct their affairs in their own language, or else South Africa cannot be called a democracy. He encouraged that policies be promoted to empower people to resist dominance from the potentially oppressive power of English. Such sentiments are also highlighted by Ogle (1999), who cautioned that when we insist on English, we are overseeing the death of African languages, as well as acting as both executioner and grave digger.

If English is dominant in all spheres, the essence of multilingualism as enshrined in the Constitution is lost. Kamwangamalu (2000:50) refers to the trend as “new language policy, old language practices” and cites the example where, since 1994, there have not been cases reported of Black students wanting an African language as a medium of instruction, although there have been cases reported of Black students wanting an English medium of instruction in Afrikaans medium schools. Tertiary students adhere to the trend, as do many Black parents who equate mother tongue instruction with suspicion, because of its association with an inferior standard of education, one of the many legacies of apartheid.

LANGUAGE POLICY AND EDUCATION

Diverse groups of learners bring with them their own experiences and approaches to learning, at the basis of which lies language. Language must not be seen as an end in itself, but as a means to engaging in reciprocal exchange and integrating new knowledge with existing knowledge (NDE Policy document 1997).

Language and social redress are thus complementary issues. The manner in which language is approached in our educational institutions is therefore not only vital to learning, but to the future of our country. For the language issue to be addressed fully it is necessary to revisit policy. The establishment of language policy is critical in educational institutions in order to empower learners and bring about redress. Torbe (1986:149) saw language policy as “a set of intentions constructed by the group who will abide by it, and it informs the behavior of everyone who is party to the construction”.

Language policy therefore helps in establishing how an institution approaches language issues. Corson (1988:52) views language policy as a dynamic document that should state “how we will do what we will do”. Like any other policy it should also come up for review as the need arises. At tertiary level in particular, language policy should not be limited only to educational issues. Policies and programmes must also promote the interests of the linguistically disempowered and marginalised. It should not attempt to enhance marginalisation. This is integral to the future of our country. The Council for Higher Education (CHE:2000) stance on language therefore recommends using African languages as the Formal Academic Language (FAL), translating question papers into African languages and allowing learners to answer in the mother tongue. It is therefore imperative that lecturers too attempt to acquire the dominant language of the region.

The following section of the article examines the establishment of the ML Sultan Technikon language policy by discussing some of the language problems encountered along the way, and some of interventionist strategies that have been adopted in an attempt to address some of the problems. In doing so the article looks at a survey I conducted at the institution, and reports on interviews conducted with students and tutors since the implementation of the policy. The article also makes recommendations on the basis of student and tutor feedback.

ML SULTAN TECHNIKON LANGUAGE POLICY

The ML Sultan Technikon is situated in Durban, KwaZulu Natal. The institution catered to a predominately Indian, English first language student body during the apartheid era. The last six years have indicated a marked shift in student demographics to a predominantly Black, English second language majority. As a result of lectures and assessments being conducted in English medium, many second language students have been experiencing problems with reading, writing, speaking and cognitive skills.
In addition, in a study of 40 randomly selected Indian first language and Black second language students at the institution, it was found that misunderstandings and miscommunication occurred among students in the multilingual, multicultural classes at the technikon. Black students cited the main reason for the misunderstandings among Indian and Black students to be limited English proficiency of Black students, followed by lack of awareness of cultural differences (Kajee 1997).

Further research conducted at the technikon indicates that problems encountered by second language students with the content of their courses are often as a result of linguistic inadequacies in English, resulting in a high failure rate. The results of a survey conducted among academic staff (Kajee 1998) confirm that limited English proficiency is still seen as a key reason for students’ failure to cope with academic tasks effectively. In the survey of 240 academic staff, a response rate of 63 (26 percent) was received. Limited English language skills was given as being directly responsible for poor student performance by 100 percent of the respondents. Of the solutions offered, the following were selected by the majority of the respondents as possible solutions to addressing the language problem: short language courses, perhaps through the establishment of a Writing Centre, more integrated language and content work, academic writing skills and staff development to create an awareness of language issues among all staff.

This, in essence is also encapsulated in the MLST language policy which was proposed in 1997. Until then, individual departments and concerned staff had attempted to broach the language issue with various interventions:

- English language as a component of bridging courses
- integrated academic support English tutorials
- integrated and add on voluntary English language tutorials
- workshops on academic skills such as study skills, assignment writing and deconstructing examination questions.

All attempts were met with varying degrees of success. Departments that recognised that language ability is intrinsic to academic success, made concerted efforts to improve the language ability of their students. Other departments continued treating their student body as a homogenous one. Therefore, although the technikon has been operating in the old paradigm of language and communication teaching in the past, the move is definitely toward a more integrated system. The establishment of a language policy was the first attempt to standardise language interventions throughout the technikon.

The guiding principles of the policy include promoting the languages of South Africa, specifically those of the KZN region, respecting language and cultural diversity, facilitating access to meaningful education for all students, promoting the use of the students’ mother tongue as the languages of learning and teaching and encouraging the acquisition of at least two regional languages. However, the policy retains English as the medium of instruction because it is the common language of instructors and students. The policy contains short, medium and long term goals which are discussed in detail later in the article.

Since the policy was first presented to the technikon body and Senate, it is necessary to review the extent to which it is being practised. It must also be noted that many staff members have been successful with their students by applying good teaching practice, not necessarily by consciously adhering to the language policy. Discussion of the policy includes personal reflection, observation and feedback from interviews with a random sample of students and tutors.

**METHODOLOGY**

Group interviews were held with 70 students from the Faculties of Arts, Science, Engineering and Commerce.

**Table 1**

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<tr>
<th>Faculty</th>
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<td>Arts</td>
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<td>Science</td>
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<td>Engineering</td>
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<td>Commerce</td>
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The student number varied in each faculty because of the number of students I have access to in my classes and who agreed to participate in the study. The sample was therefore a voluntary random one. In addition, five Supplemental Instruction tutors were interviewed. The subjects included male and female first and second language speakers between the ages of 18 and 22. All the students were in their first year of study. Tutors were final year students who had been tutoring for a minimum of one semester.

The interview method was chosen because it is a widely applied technique for conducting inquiries and was selected for its ability to get access to the way subjects interpreted their involvement in the language issue.

Semi structured interviews were used rather than structured interviews because of the degree of
flexibility involved. Semi structured interviews allowed me to probe for more detail, and ask for clarification where necessary. The subjects were also able to elucidate points that they wanted to make. Dowsett (cited by Nunan 1992:149) says that semi structured interviews can elicit evidence about life that is not possible with questionnaires or structured interviews. It also gives the interviewee more power and control over the interview situation.

Bias is inherent in most research methods. Ideally, the interviewer should not be biased towards the subject. However, bias may be manifested in the form of unintentional errors such as forgetting certain questions, misunderstanding the interviewee, failure to probe, or preconceived expectations. As an Indian female, and the subjects’ lecturer I had to ensure that I remained neutral and objective and did not prompt for answers I was sub consciously looking for, but instead allow the subjects to frame their responses with direction only in the form of the questions on the interview schedule which was used to prevent the possibility of questions being omitted. Questions that were evaded, misinterpreted or misunderstood were also rephrased.

DISCUSSION

The discussion of results is summarised according to the key short term, medium term and long term goals in the policy. Students’ and tutors’ views of the various aspects of the policy, as well as the constraints facing some of these aspects are discussed. In most instances, except where specified, the majority response is reflected. Because of space constraints, the results are not discussed per faculty, but rather as a collective response across the faculties.

SHORT-TERM GOALS

- Students should be encouraged to use their mother-tongue or language of choice in formulating their ideas and discussing them. They should not be pressured to use English

Students at the Technikon come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The majority of second language students felt comfortable being allowed to use the mother tongue, having had experiences in certain classes where they were told that they could only use the medium of English. When group work is used as a strategy, the group complement may include speakers from different language groups. A small number of English mother tongue students commented that they felt alienated in their groups at times if isiZulu, the dominant indigenous language was used. Even Zulu mother tongue speakers, on occasion have questioned why they should be “encouraged” to use their mother tongue when they are attending the Technikon hoping to improve their English, especially in the light of all assessments and report back sessions being required in English medium. The second language Supplemental Instruction (SI) tutors were comfortable using the mother tongue in their tutorials, except when first language students attended. However, they maintained that they code switched and code mixed in order to explain and simplify concepts. First language tutors stated the desire to acquire a knowledge of isiZulu as they saw it as being helpful in their tutorials. They also felt that although they may not be able to speak the language well, an understanding of it was sufficient for the present.

Therefore, although the goal was positively implemented in most instances and many students felt empowered by the effort, some students regarded the attempt with suspicion.

- Peer group learning should be encouraged by students who understand concepts in English, to explain them in Zulu

This goal was encouraged informally but it was not possible to enforce it in any way, except through the Supplemental Instruction initiative through the Department of Educational Development. First language speakers questioned whether this could be interpreted as stigmatising second language speakers. However, when the Supplemental Instruction programme was implemented by the Department of Educational Development, I observed many tutorials where this was practised quite successfully and the students appreciated the method. In one instance, key Accounting concepts were discussed with second language students who did not do Accounting at matric level. During the interview with the tutor she stated that the approach helped the students understand the terminology much better and they related well to a peer.

- Questions in examination papers should be bilingual, in English and Zulu, for example, where there are Zulu members of staff

It was felt that students’ understanding of the questions would be enhanced by such an endeavor. While there are Zulu mother tongue lecturers in most departments, the practice has not occurred to date. It is also very difficult to coin Zulu equivalents for technical terms in Science and Engineering in particular. Second language students said that they would like the opportunity to answer questions in their mother tongue and had requested this through certain departments, however this has not been possible thus far. One of the main reasons given is the limited number of Zulu mother tongue staff.
• Technikon documents such as enrolment forms should be available in Zulu and English

To date, although many notices appear bilingually around the campus, enrolment and bursary forms, for example still appear in English. The majority of the respondents stated that they would like official documents to appear in both English and isiZulu in order to help them understand them better. Tutors also felt that this would be more accessible. Although the majority of respondents appear to opt for more use of the mother tongue, a few respondents maintained the attitude that “We are living in an English world” and that students needed to improve their English world, especially when the workplace uses English extensively.

• All teachers are, or should attempt to be, language teachers

Such an approach contextualises language and encourages a content based approach. While this is the ideal, there are many lecturers who are quite happy to refer students to their Communication lecturers in order to improve their language skills. This band aid approach is certainly not helpful, especially when all staff are qualified in their disciplines and should be capable of explaining their specialised terminology in a more accessible fashion. Staff in the Communication Department service most departments throughout the technikon, and teach an average of 22 periods a week. It is simply not feasible to be able to provide such a service to the entire student body. Subjects were favourable of the idea that Science, Engineering and Commerce lecturers combined language skills with the content they lectured. One example of essay writing was discussed. Students stated that often they had to write long essays, but were not taught effectively the structure of essay writing. This they found problematic, especially since Communication lecturers could teach effective writing style, but not Science or Engineering content.

• Supporting a “plain language policy”

Most lecturers attempt to ensure the use of plain language in their teaching, lecture notes, handouts and study guides. However it has not been ascertained at this stage, the extent to which it is actually practised, and would serve well for another research area. Subjects felt that certain lecturers were very “academic” and their pace was often fast. They felt that they would benefit from such an input. Tutors said that they were trained to practice plain language and because they were peers they did not encounter problems in this regard. Certain subjects stated that in certain departments in all faculties lecturers were sensitive to their needs and in these classes they felt “comfortable” and “happy”.

MEDIUM-TERM GOALS

• Basic/conversational Zulu training for all staff should be undertaken by the technikon

Short courses have been conducted with staff in basic conversational Zulu. Subjects and tutors were extremely positive towards the endeavour and would like to see more of such courses throughout the technikon. As one subject stated “If we speak English as a second language, our lecturers should speak isiZulu as a second language”.

LONG-TERM GOALS

• Establishment of a writing centre with tutors who can advise students on language and format requirements of projects and assignments

Initial discussions were made to establish a Writing Centre at the institution, however, because of budgetary constraints, the plan was shelved until this year. Subjects felt positive about this as they felt they could attend “as and when” they needed help, without having to attend too many structured language classes. Tutors felt they could often not cope with students’ language demands, and felt that it “would be better” for students to approach professionals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to encourage bilingualism and functional multilingualism at tertiary institutions, and to further implement the MLST language policy, the following are recommended:

• that all lecturers are conscious of their own language usage, both in their teaching and in their materials
• that language is taught in an integrated fashion, encouraging a language across the curriculum and content based approach
• that language assessments are integrated in all other content courses, in written and oral form
• that lecturers attempt to acquire a knowledge of at least the dominant regional language, in the case of KZN, isiZulu
• that language issues be documented in the form of policy, and once policy is formulated, it be adhered to. It is also necessary to review and amend policy from time to time
• that language audits and needs analyses be conducted across the institution to ascertain changing student needs.
CONCLUSION

The MLST language policy does not make claims at being a ground breaker in the field, rather it does attempt to standardise language issues which were problematic at the time of conception. Some issues remain problematic. However, with the Council of Higher Education document on the languages of teaching and learning, perhaps the time is appropriate for review.

Implementing a language policy is not an easy task, but if it is approached in a positive manner by all participants, it is to the advantage of educators and learners. The MLST language policy has good intentions, but as can be seen from the discussion above, it is operating under constraints. As it stands, English is the medium of instruction at the Technikon and this must be weighed against constitutional stipulations. Of prime concern is the issue of monitoring, an issue that will have to be taken up by quality control bodies.

On a macro level, we must ask if we are feeding into national policy. To place English at the forefront may be realistic at tertiary level, but what about promoting language as a tool for national unity? Whether an institution settles for English, bilingual or multilingual medium of instruction, the needs of the students and the country must be considered. It is tempting to opt for an English model, but participants must consider the eventual price that must be paid. Of prime concern is the plight of indigenous languages should English assume dominance in all spheres.

If tertiary institutions are shouting for transformation, as is evident in vision and mission statements, perhaps it is time to consider transformation at grassroots level, because transformation is evident from the very moment we open our mouths to speak, and from the language that emits.

BIBLIOGRAPHY